

A Non-Scientific Measure of
Some of the Water that has Run Under the Bridge
since the 1870's

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Recently I found in my files a pamphlet: "The Cummins Controversy," dated Easter 1874 -- only months after the founding of the Reformed Episcopal Church. Its author, the Rev. John H. Drumm, of St. James Church, Bristol, Bucks County, says that a discussion of "formidable dimensions" is under way.

Both sides in this debate draw confidently on history. The immediate issue is whether or not the Church of England ever admitted persons ordained in non-episcopal communions to cures, without re-ordination. Amusingly, one spokesman admits to having put some dummy names and events in a previous paper to see whether or not his opponents were napping. (It seems that to some extent they were.)

This little tract is not worth noting because someone was right and someone else wrong in 1874, but because such an exchange took place -- and obviously there were others like it. (Does anyone's archives have the full record?) Both sides cared -- cared enough to think, to articulate positions, to engage one another. Moreover, I remark the Anglican character of the debate. Both sides were at home in Strype's annals and other documentary records of the English church. They argued with one another as informed heirs of the same tradition.

In time, such conversation -- whether irenic or acrimonious in tone -- seems to have broken off. The unguarded border between the two churches has often been crossed by individual friendships. Some persons whose lives and ministries were for some years invested in one church have moved to the other, with little shift in theology, spirituality, or pastoral practice. There was some ill-documented conversation between the two churches in the 1940's. But, to a great extent, the two traditions -- each of which had, at times, projected for itself a reconciling, ecumenical role -- stopped talking to one another.

The Episcopal Church largely forgot its oldest (and until recently its only) division. But to forget this 120-year-old division is to forget a moment of grievous loss. Evangelicalism stemmed from 18th century Wesleyanism -- with its biblicism, its emphasis on the preaching of faith, its concern for a deeply felt personal religion, and its passion for world mission and for social reform. Evangelicalism (which departing from Wesley, had become moderately Calvinistic) remained a vital force in the Church of England and in the Episcopal

Church through the 19th century. The departure following 1873 of a group of able and principled Evangelicals left that Evangelical wing of the Episcopal church weakened. The passage of some Evangelical initiative into the Reformed Episcopal Church represented initial shock and continuing diminishment.

For its part, as I see it, the Reformed Episcopal Church -- understandably, and perhaps inevitably, drew away (at least at some times and among some persons) from its own deep past. The leaders of the first generation had been formed in the Anglican tradition, which they knew and loved. They judged that to preserve it as they understood it they had to leave the Episcopal Church. (The old portions of the Seminary library, evidently largely gifts from personal collections, contain the Parker Society volumes and classics of Anglicanism, as recent as Bishop Gore. I remember a beautiful 17th century folio of John Donne's sermons that had apparently once belonged to the English missionary bishop and hymn writer, Reginald Heber. Such literature had provided the first years of the Reformed Episcopal Church with its intellectual sustenance and its sense of identity.)

Could this heritage be perpetuated? The answer is: not easily. With the division, the institutional carriers of the Anglican heritage were now alien territory. The founders established a seminary to maintain the tradition of learning. But scholars who sought more advanced study had to turn to non-Episcopalian resources, become familiar with non-Anglican issues, and see themselves in other than Episcopalian contexts.

This process did not happen quickly, and all along many bishops, presbyters and lay persons in the Reformed Episcopal Church remained heirs of Anglican Evangelicalism. However, this strain was often muted. But churches, like individuals, or like marriages, have seasons, and in recent years the Reformed Episcopal Church has seen a significant re-emphasis in on the historical and liturgical features that gave it its distinctive place in American church life. But persons close to this stir should speak of it, not I.

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The Reformed Episcopal Church began at a time of bitter partisanship. The Anglo-Catholic movement which began in the 1830's and 40's and kept its vigor through the century, polarized the church. In the interest of asserting the spiritual authority of the church under Christ, Anglo-Catholics made excessive claims for episcopacy, priesthood and sacraments. Extreme partisans virtually un-churched Protestants. Behind the arrogant claims of the Catholic party of Anglicanism was the Church of Rome, with its theological and juridical absolutism, culminating in the 1870 decree on papal infallibility.

A great deal has happened in a century and a quarter. No one in the 1870's could have predicted the church situation of the 1990's.

This history needs revisiting, for divisions that were opened in the late 19th century and have not been kept under review are likely now to reflect outdated information, arguments and attitudes. We can all -- Episcopalians who are Reformed and those who are less reformed than they ought to be -- become locked into frozen opinions. If cordiality is to open in our own time each church must reckon with the other as it has become, not as it was when conversation broke off in another era.

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I would like to sketch trajectories of several developments since the late 19th century. But before I do, in order to get a perspective on the story that unites and divides us, let me offer a personal view of what it is like to be Anglican. (I do so, assuring you that somewhere there is an Episcopalian in good standing who would cheerfully and conscientiously disagree with everything I say.) The most casual observer would note that Anglicanism is complex. Some critics would call it confused and confusing; others, more sanguine, would suggest that since God's truth is large, and since no one has it entire, Anglicanism seeks to hold together groups and opinions which have something to offer, even though they differ. One person's confusion is another person's comprehensiveness.

The ideal of comprehensiveness may trace to the Elizabethan settlement and to the 17th century Anglican apologist, Richard Hooker, who set forth a three-fold basis of authority: scripture, reason, and tradition. These three sources, Hooker said, do not fill the same functions, and they are not equal; but they are necessary to one another and together they are necessary to an adequate structure of faith and community. (Hooker would not have understood "comprehensive" to mean formless or without priorities.) His formulation of religious authority opened Anglicanism to the development of three emphases -- Evangelical (the Bible party), broad church (the reason party), and high church (the tradition party). Each party's grasp of the Christian gospel became institutionalized in ideas and passions and in external insignia of worship and ethos. Over the years, initiative in Anglicanism has passed among these emphases, and the three have influenced each other. In a sense the whole church is committed to biblical authority, to disciplined reflection, and to spiritual continuity. But the three factors are differently ordered in the minds of different persons with different vocations.

The unity and tension of these three interdependent emphases requires that an Anglican acquire an unusual skill. A friend once compared it to an old-fashioned church picnic at which two people standing side by side put their two nearest legs into a gunny sack, and then compete with other pairs in a "three-legged race." It is an ungainly way to make progress. But if contestants try to go faster by putting all three legs together and hopping, they fall down! My friend said: "For every step forward I take with my Bible foot, I must take one each with my liberal foot and with my high-church foot." The question for an Anglican is: Can I be what I am, and at the same time get along with others who, under the gospel, are one with me, but different from me? Not everyone finds such a task possible; few find it easy; but no one finds it dull.

No Episcopalian is required to like or approve everything that every other Episcopalian is doing -- an impossible assignment. However, one must grant the right of others (who consent to the basic structures of liturgy and polity) to be what they are; one must assume that they are acting with Christian integrity; and one resists the impulse to hop!

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To return to recent developments, I can say next to nothing about the history of the Reformed Episcopal Church -- its own self-understanding, or its reading of other churches. That record is being developed by those who can do it well. When Dr. Guelzo's forthcoming book comes out, he can count on at least one interested reader (or, more important to an author, on at least one willing purchaser).

Let me rough out a few features that have shaped present-day Anglicanism. (I select three among many.) These factors may make renewed conversation between two churches easier or harder, but they must be taken into account.

Anglo-Catholicism: The Anglo-Catholic movement, which provided the occasion for Bishop Cummins' break, was seen by many as a threat -- a turn in the direction of the Roman system -- then at the height of its absolutist claims. The shock of Newman's defection was fresh. "Rome" was a scare-word.

After 150 years it is clear that Anglo-Catholicism did not capture the Episcopal Church as Bishop Cummins may have feared it would. Yet this powerful initiative has influenced Anglicanism deeply, but variously. The Catholic movement restored, perhaps romantically, a sense of the ages-old Christian tradition. The Cambridge side of the movement commended Medieval ritual uncritically; but the Oxford side had its roots in the early church -- Athanasius, not Aquinas. There is hardly a church in Anglicanism whose consciousness and

practice has not been influenced by this 19th century impulse -- movement and color in worship, the union of sacrament with the word, openness to the mystical tradition, the ideal of disciplined holiness. And perhaps surprisingly, the incarnational theology of the Catholic impulse produced heroic, dedicated pastoral work among the poor and marginalized in the slums of Britain and the U.S.

However, the Anglo-catholic impulse entered the life of a generally non-ideological church. Its dogmatism depended to a great extent on Post-Tridentine Romanism; however, with the radical changes in theology, liturgy and the ecumenical openness in the present-day Roman church, there seems little point in making the Episcopal Church the last refuge of the Counter Reformation.

The Reformed Episcopalians who drafted the Declaration of Principles no doubt found it hard to differentiate. Dangerous doctrine was bound up with dangerous ceremonial. Evangelical doctrine required that one sustain austere "low" customs. Directness in the relation with God required plainness. Erect a cross in or over a church, and no one knew where it would end. Yet even in 1875, one might have known that Newman through all his Anglican days celebrated from the North end. One could be doctrinally "high" and ritually "low." Contrarily, today it is not uncommon to find parishes of the Episcopal Church which contend for quite Evangelical doctrine -- paramount concern for the gospel and for personal faith -- while wearing the eucharistic vestments and lighting more candles than are needed in broad daylight.

We live in times in which old things are becoming new. I hope that the Reformed Episcopal Church has taken satisfaction in noting that when it directed years ago that "The table should be so placed that the Minister may stand behind it," its counsel has been belatedly followed by the Sacred Congregation of Rites.

Anglo-Catholicism, in sum, was accepted, and in the course of time, it modified and enriched the whole church -- but the emphasis was itself modified by the stubborn mixture of things that make up present-day Anglicanism.

Maurice and the "broad" outlook: One of the most creative 19th century Anglican theologians was Frederick Denison Maurice (d.1872) -- creative, but not always perfectly clear. His orthodoxy was both questioned and defended. He has so left his mark that many Anglicans are Mauricians who have never heard his name.

One of Maurice's central convictions was that Christ is head of the church, indeed, head of the race -- he is above

principalities and powers, above every name that can be named. When the church confesses the lordship of Christ, it is not expressing a religious opinion; it is declaring the order of reality. Christ is head over those who name him and over those who do not. One's faith and one's baptism do not touch one's religious affiliation alone, but one's basic humanity.

Such convictions let Maurice recognize truth from any quarter as God's truth. New ideas and discoveries were crowding in on the Victorians, and many representatives of both the Evangelical and the Anglo-Catholic wings of the church reacted in quite illiberal ways. As one certainty after another was shattered, they seemed to want to repeal the 19th century. The flexibility and openness of Maurice's "broad" style of thought helped carry Anglicanism into the 20th century with some grace.

Moreover, Maurice was burdened by Christian division; he sought to identify the central, necessary marks of Christ's church and to distinguish them from non-essentials. He was an exemplar of the maxim "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

The issues in the Reformed Episcopal division were cast in the form of Evangelicalism vs. Anglo-Catholicism -- important, to be sure. Yet the differences might have been moderated or seen in different light if there had been (on both sides) familiarity with the Anglicanism of Maurice -- Maurice who affirmed and at the same criticized both evangelical and catholic. I first encountered Maurice's name and writings in period copies of his works in the library of the Seminary of the Reformed Episcopal Church -- someone had thought him worth reading and collecting. However, his tradition seemed to have languished. Indeed, he is not as well known in the Episcopal Church as he ought to be. Yet any conversation with the Episcopal Church today must recognize the role of this third party in the making of Anglicanism.

Liturgical change: Since both the Reformed Episcopal Church and the Episcopal Church use and love the Book of Common Prayer, and since the Prayer Book figured in the conflicts of the 1870's, the liturgical stir in this century must figure in any future understanding between these two churches.

In the late 1800's some Anglicans were moving towards "advanced" ritual, while others were holding firm against it. Since then, however, the liturgical agenda has changed. Documentary sources from the early church revealed the clarity and vitality of the worship forms of the first centuries; and in the early decades of the 20th century the neo-Medieval ideal of liturgical life gave way to the model of the early church -- "the springtime of the liturgy."

Liturgical thinkers thrust to the center the active, worshipping community, open to God; and they emphasized the Scriptures, read and proclaimed by which that community rehearses at worship the story of its redemption. Old understandings of the Holy Communion and of consecration of the elements virtually collapsed, to be replaced by vital, more personal and biblical formulations. New concepts and new/old models put pressure on liturgical texts (most of which were created in the 16th century) and on customs (many of which were static and heavily clerical). Liturgical renewal is not a matter of rearranging furniture in the chancel, but of asking penetrating questions about the meaning of the gospel and of the gathered people of God.

The stir I describe has been ecumenical; Roman, Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed liturgists consult the same sources and talk the same language. The Roman Church -- the largest, most international, and apparently the most irreformable Christian group -- has, as you know, brought about (in quite a short time) a systemic renovation of the language, appearance, actions, and sound of its cultic life. Most Protestant churches had adopted liturgical practices which either continued or else deliberately rejected Medieval practices. The Roman church's aggiornamento prompted other churches to undertake a similar rigorous re-examination of their inherited patterns of worship.

This remarkable development goes beneath old polarities. While not repudiating the central convictions that have informed past faiths, it has a way of fulfilling the genius of catholic and of evangelical. It is more difficult (and less important) than it once was to identify "Romanizing germs."

We Episcopalians are strongly shaped by our forms of worship. Prayer Book revision can seem risky, for we are reforming the thing that in important ways forms us. Yet the Episcopal Church, through a participatory process lasting thirty years, completed in 1979 a major Prayer Book revision. I shall not describe this complex document -- only suggest that it, more than any other single source, expresses the faith and character of the Episcopal Church in the late 20th century. To understand the Episcopal Church, one must inquire into the book through which week by week it opens the secrets of its heart to God.

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To make an end: Conversation between two churches is returning, after some lapse. In important respects these two churches are related to one another as neither is to any other. Both stand in the Anglican tradition; both retain the historic episcopate; both use loyally a Prayer Book which traces from a book which my 19th century pamphlet tells me Bp. Cummins once described as "eminently adapted to unfold and nourish the

spiritual life of the believer." Thanks to their Anglican roots, neither church is ideological (although ideologues have at times found a home in each). Each has sought to hold out (not always effectively) against the powerful, but vague, optimistic and superficial religiosity of American society. Both derive their life and mission from the Christian gospel, and both accept the final judgment of that gospel on the life and mission they have developed.

With so much in common, let us be friends. Friends care about one another and do not let the other get out of touch. Let us stay in conversation.